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THE FORMATION OF TENNYSON'S STYLE: A Study, Primarily, of the Versification of the Early Poems, by J. F. A. Pyre (University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature, Number 12). Madison, 1921.

Professor Pyre has undertaken the sort of evaluation of Tennyson's works which is suggested by the sub-title of his monograph. He has adjudicated the relative importance of Tennyson's poems by examining their prosody. This metrical examination has enabled him to arrange Tennyson's work in three chronological groups. There is in his youth the period of exuberant experimentation with a variety of complex stanza forms. Out of this groping for the forms best adapted to express his personality, developed the mature work of the 1842 volume. In this volume the prevailing forms were blank verse and the four stress or the four and three stress iambic quatrain, both of which were employed with skilful but limited modulations. The final period, if we except *In Memoriam*, was one of decadence, in which the security of the laureateship or of popular applause insidiously promoted a revolt from the standard that had been attained and a return to the freedom and the experimentation of his early years. This general view is not new. So far as prosody is concerned, it is implied in Saintsbury's chapter on Tennyson in his *History of Nineteenth Century Literature*. It is the view of those men, like Fitzgerald, who in his own day or since have been attracted chiefly by the melody of Tennyson's verse.

Professor Pyre's method of substantiating his thesis is as familiar as the thesis itself. This method, which was first given its scholarly basis in Robert Bridge's treatise on *Milton's Prosody*, assumes that English verse is primarily accentual rather than quantitative or syllabic in its nature. Once this position is taken, if English metrics are to be properly understood, an inquiry must follow into the relation between stresses. This inquiry implies a more thoro investigation than would be necessary in French or Latin into the nature and frequency of the mediums that may be used to break or modify the regularity of stress recurrence. In the hands of most commentators, including the present one, the inquiry becomes an intricate statistical analysis of inversions, cesuras, final feet, extra syllabic lines, and so on.

Applied to Tennyson, this prosodic method reveals the poet's attainment at his maturity to a comparatively simple norm in line and stanza, as the following summary shows.

In the 1830 volume there are scarcely two poems in the same meter. The irregularity of the stanza forms is shown most apparently by the fact that even in the few sonnets included the normal structure is violated. The best poems according to

Professor Pyre are those that are most regular; and of these *Mariana* is noteworthy, for the last four lines of this stanza, when detached, become the form later used for *In Memoriam*. The 1833 volume is marked by similar variety, but shows a tendency to retain the same stanza form without modification during a whole poem. In the 1842 volume the norm has been attained. Many of the poems of this volume are thoro rewritings of poems in the 1833 issue. Professor Pyre gives us once more the familiar analysis of the differences in the structure of *A Dream of Fair Women* and *The Palace of Art* (p. 50) in the two editions. There are thirty-six new poems, besides, in this volume. Of these, two are ballads, two anapestic, two trochaic, two iambic in meter; but nine are in blank verse and eighteen in four stress or four and three stress quatrains. Herein then lies the norm, which Professor Pyre believes Tennyson worked out for himself without external aid. This normal poem is short, slow of movement, regular of stress. The foot is pre-vaillingly iambic, seldom trochaic. The diction is simplified and chary of polysyllables. There is a moderate use of beginning and cesural inversions. There is an avoidance of weak syllables at the stress and at the verse end. There are few double endings and few cesuras; in other words, there are few extra syllables and predominantly masculine pauses within the line. A moderate use of spondees aids in the production of a slow line by strengthening the unstressed syllables (p. 115). Professor Pyre gives accurate statistical verification for these generalizations. This norm is somewhat relaxed in the *Morte d'Arthur*, which Professor Pyre agrees with Fitzgerald in believing Tennyson's finest poem (p. 139). But here there is a compensation. "Freedom of syllabing and stress modulation, then, are skilfully balanced by careful maintenance of the verse unit and regularity in the disposition of pause" (p. 147).

After the 1842 volume, with the exception of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson issued nothing of comparable merit. *In Memoriam* meets with Professor Pyre's approval because, being a series of short poems in a simple meter, it affords adequate opportunity for Tennyson's prevaillingly lyric gift to express itself. Its verse form, tho used by certain previous poets (Jonson, Sidney, etc.), was evolved independently, and is skilfully modulated. The pauses come generally at the end of the first line and towards the end of the third, so that the central couplet is not over-emphasized and is connected in sense with the concluding line (p. 186). In the rest of the later poems, degeneracy is evidenced as a result of the demand for fluency in the long narrative poems which enticed Tennyson at this period. This fluency, which the dramatic character of the later work demanded, Professor Pyre does not justify, for he has little respect for Tennyson as a narrative poet. *The Princess* is a *tour de force* of uncertain

interpretation in which only the songs are good. The proof rests on the fact that out of each one hundred lines 20.16 per cent have extra syllables; whereas in the 1842 volume the percentage was 5.8. In the *Idylls*, except for those written in the earlier period, there are many licenses taken to secure a dramatic realism and an ease of flow. The list is impressive, and includes counter cesural inversions, weak measures, epic cesuras, double endings, final tribrachs, weak feminine endings (p. 205). Indeed Tennyson himself is censured for saying that he wrote the poems with ease and little correction, and for admitting that he varied the verse to suit the changing character of the theme. Finally in his last work, Tennyson shows a tendency to revert to his youthful practice of experimentation; only now the experimentation is not in historical English forms but in classical meters. When he is not writing these interesting studies, which are nevertheless not poems, he betrays his histrionic tendency by writing dramas. This unnatural absorption in the dramatic, which Professor Pyre suggests may have been partly due to the influence of Browning (p. 153, 163, 190), is seen most conspicuously in the morbid impetuosity of *Maud*. If a norm is to be looked for in this period, it is to be found in a delight in three stress and six stress verse units and irregular and trochaic or dactylic rhythms (p. 222: note p. 209).

Professor Pyre's monograph concludes with two interesting appendices. The second establishes a probability that Tennyson, and not Browning, originated the *Locksley Hall* meter. The first consists of an analysis of the diction of the early poems. The result of this analysis is a correction of the views of J. C. Collins (*Tennyson's Early Poems*, London, 1900), who had emphasized the influence upon Tennyson of his immediate predecessors. After a comparative study of his diction, Professor Pyre concludes that Tennyson was under greater influence from Milton and Shakespeare in his formative years than from Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge. The influence of Coleridge is negligible. That of Shelley is found in those passages in which Shelley himself has been indebted to Milton. The early and very transient influence of Byron is similar to that of Shelley in character (p. 74).

The above outline is sufficient to show that Professor Pyre has done a service in proving by a painstaking statistical analysis what has often been said of Tennyson: that by a careful apprenticeship and a constant rewriting, Tennyson had succeeded by 1842 in bringing his exuberance of descriptive powers under control and in establishing comparatively simple verse forms which he modulated in less obvious ways than previously. But unfortunately Professor Pyre has not limited himself to this service alone. He has allowed much purely literary material to creep into a monograph that begins as a technical treatise. When

he gets to the period after 1842, which he calls decadent because the normal verse forms he has set up for Tennyson are being discarded or loosely used, he gives only cursory summaries of his technical material and supplements such statements with literary speculations which he does not support with any detailed reasoning. The critic would not feel forced to object to this broadening of the scope of the work simply because it leads to a superficiality of treatment. He must object also to the critical point of view which Professor Pyre assumes to justify it. Professor Pyre is still a Pre-Raphaelite, and believes a poem to consist of a pattern of musical words built out of some inconspicuous abstraction. Even in this present day, when there are many iconoclasts who find Tennyson insipid and effeminate, Professor Pyre may be pardoned for his several references to the finality and perfection of Tennyson's poetry at its best (pp. 50, 148, 156-60). But there are few to-day who will not find objectionable the almost complete disregard of sense in favor of sound which is inevitable in a treatise that attempts a half esthetic, half technical analysis of metrics.

The reader does not have to hunt in the dark for proof of Professor Pyre's preference for form instead of content. In his criticism of *The Princess* Professor Pyre states by inference his critical canon: "It is quite plain that the theme and the stuff of his poetry came to occupy him somewhat to the exclusion of its architectonics, its technical detail, and its atmosphere. By 1869, he who once bade fair to be a very king among the Pre-Raphaelites was in a mood to hail 'Art for Art's sake' as 'truest Lord of Hell.' " (p. 164). Professor Pyre, who admires Tennyson only when he is a lyric poet, finds no compensation for what he considers faulty meter in the philosophy of such works as *Vastness*, *De Profundis*, and *The Higher Pantheism*, or in such characterizations as those of Launcelot and Guinevere, of Lucretius and Virgil. Blind to these aspects of the poet, the author of the treatise before us is not unwilling to pluck from *The Ancient Sage* such lyrical insipidities as the following stanza to illustrate a surviving beauty in a period of decay (p. 220):—

The years that when my youth began
Had set the lily and rose
By all my ways, where'er they ran,
Have ended mortal foes;
My rose of love forever gone,
My lily of truth and trust,
They made her lily and rose in one
And changed her into dust.

Such a critical method, arising from a supposedly scholarly treatment of metrics, the reviewer would find himself inclined to decry, if it were not so palpably a mid-Victorian survival. Shorn of its esthetic criticism, Professor Pyre's work retains a

certain value for students of English prosody. But those readers who desire a sound critical survey of Tennyson's earlier years, of which a study of verse structure forms a subordinate element, had best confine themselves to Lounsbury's *Life and Times of Tennyson (1809-1850)*.

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